

Julia Rosado

Matt Lynch

Thesis Paper

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People You'll Never Meet

We are living in a social climate where respect and empathy are seen as political and controversial, and basic human decency is seen as a radical act. With this project, I argue that empathy and respect are vital to fully understanding the human experience. Society all throughout history has been denying the experiences of fellow human beings for reasons of religion, social acceptance, and opinions. Whether it's for a person's sexuality, race, gender, weight, or social class, people fail to understand that we are all human beings; we are built up from the same matter, we have brains, we have hearts, we have family trees, and we have our own complex emotions and experiences. Through a series of oil paintings, my thesis challenges one to truly understand the experience of others around them in order to foster a culture of respect and understanding in a time where that is seen as a controversy.

The concept of *sonder*, a term coined by writer John Koenig in 2012, is the realization that everyone around you, whether it's a random passerby on the street and will never meet, a homeless person sleeping on a nearby park bench, or any of the eight billion people on this planet, they all have their own lives that are intricate as one's own. We all have our own journeys with twists and turns, heartache and joy, and we all have our own stories. This concept of social empathy is crucial in understanding the true human experience and is necessary when discussing the coexistence of all people in society.

In researching this project, I began by exploring a wide range of stock photos, carefully selecting images that featured people from diverse backgrounds and situations. I found figures who I saw as authentic, individuals who could represent humanity without being reduced to stereotypes. These reference images had to be able to work together compositionally, reflect real world experiences that the audience could understand, and allow for a conversation between me as the artist, the characters, and the viewer. I delved more into the idea of *sonder*, more specifically how it has been used in art history. From the empathetic gaze in Mary Cassatt's intimate domestic scenes to Dorothea Lange's documentation of the people of the Great Depression, I drew inspiration from artists who used their work to humanize everyday people. I continued my research through reflecting on real world experiences of others; I put myself in the shoes of modern-day experiences through stories shared online, moments observed on the street, and stories I hear on the news. I used these conversations of inequality and identity in how I shaped the inner worlds of the characters I painted.



All of these characters are unknown to both me and the audience; we can all look at the figures and wonder: Who are they? What are their stories? How did they arrive at this moment? The figures represent diverse economic backgrounds, races, and sexualities, placed in a setting where they are simultaneously bound together yet are complete strangers. I urge viewers to

practice their use of sonder and empathy, even if it feels forced, to created lives, souls, experiences, and even names for all of the characters they see.

Discussed in her book titled *Social Empathy: The Art of Understanding Others*, professor and author Elizabeth Segal emphasizes that empathy extends beyond individual interactions and experiences. She speaks on social empathy, which involves understanding not only the feelings of others, but also the social, economic, and political contexts that shape one's experiences. By appreciating and respecting the lived experience of others, individuals can become better advocates for systemic disparities that we see in our current society. As Segal notes, “Using a socially empathic view of people’s experiences can create the type of insight that makes us want to change social conditions, to move us toward building a better world.” (5)

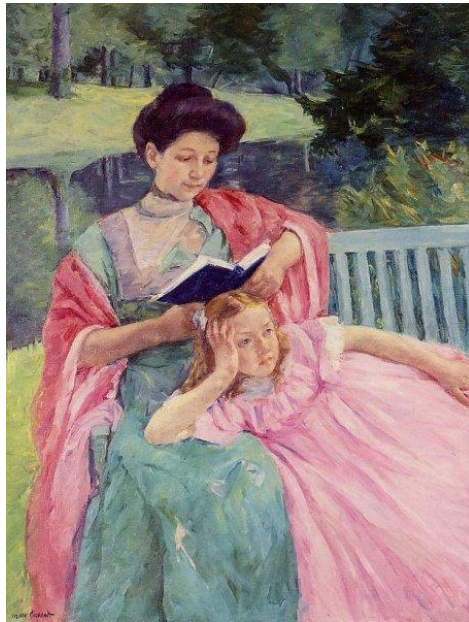
There has been an obvious decline of happiness in the United States, and Segal argues that this is a direct result of diminishing social empathy. She argues that while material wealth and technological advancements have increased, overall well-being has declined. We see this in the astronomical divide between the top 1% and everyone else in the country. Due to an increase of economic greed by selfish individuals with little to no care for others, millions of people struggle every single day. Segal notes that, “Now more than ever we need to address the deep day-to-day separation between groups and create a stronger sense of social support, which will contribute to higher levels of happiness. Empathy can help do that.” (45) Considering it’s scientifically proven that higher levels of empathy cause an increase in levels of happiness in comparison to selfishness and greed, and it’s proven that making other people happy can increase one's own happiness, it’s truly ironic that we are currently living in a society where competition is prioritized over compassion.

Throughout history, the failure to recognize others humanity has led to systemic oppression, violence, war, inequality, and the dehumanization of marginalized groups. Because of lack of acknowledgements in differences of religion, race, sexuality, gender orientation, and other factors that make us all different, the world has continued to justify acts of violence and atrocities against specific communities. People are viewed as less-than just for being different than what is viewed as “normal” in the eyes of another. The lack of empathy is a consistent thread in all of history, allowing the justification of discrimination, inequality, and mass violence. Understanding this history is crucial to recognizing how these same patterns persist in modern society.

In today’s political climate, specifically discussing the current state of the United States, empathy has been weaponized. Through conservatism and censorship, people are convinced that diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) is the villain of our economic state. Conservative individuals are upset that empathy for others is being taught in schools, and they possess a misguided ideology that simply being respectful of others is a negative thing. It’s peculiar to think about how when we were children in school, we were taught to be nice to everyone. We were constantly told to not bully others, and to be kind to those around us. All of a sudden, people in right-wing politics are viewing kindness to each other as the “woke” agenda. Personally, it never ceases to amaze me how there are so many people in this world with an inability to care about others.

When it comes to the topic of sonder and empathy in art history, Mary Cassatt is an iconic example of an artist who pushed through societal norms and responded to issues seen as “woke” at the time. As a woman, she faced restrictions as she tried to pursue a life as an artist, but she persevered. Through her impressive candid paintings of women, such as *Reading Le Figaro* and *Augusta Reading to Her Daughter*, Cassatt made sure to show women in acts that

were often overlooked in the art world at the time, like reading and taking care of children. By focusing on women in everyday life, Cassatt rejected the submissive portrayals of women that were often seen in works painted by men. She highlighted their personal journeys and autonomy as women, exploring the complexities of womanhood in a time where women were painted for the male gaze. Her paintings aimed to show the public experiences of everyday women, in hopes to fight issues regarding gender and to challenge traditional roles of women.



Mary Cassatt, *Augusta Reading to Her Daughter*, oil on canvas, 1910

A more modern-day, intersectional approach to portrait painting is that of Kehinde Wiley. As a black, gay man in today's society, Wiley focuses his work on a discussion of skin color and gender identity. Not only am I inspired by the techniques used in his large-scale oil paintings, but the way he uses his talent to discuss the experiences of people in his community in such a beautiful way. When discussing his piece *Napoleon Leading the Army Over the Alps* with CBS News in 2015, Wiley stated "If you look at the paintings that I love in art history, these are the paintings where great, powerful men are being celebrated on the big walls of museums throughout the world. What feels really strange is not to be able to see a reflection of myself in

that world”. By inserting Black and queer subjects into traditionally Eurocentric spaces, Wiley creates powerful work that people of diverse backgrounds can relate to. Though this is something very personal and unique to Wiley’s practice, I find it inspiring how he uses portraiture to evoke visibility through an intersectional lens. This parallels my own interest in capturing the complex narratives of others and prompting viewers to reflect on lives beyond their own.



Kehinde Wiley, *Napoleon Leading the Army over the Alps*, oil on canvas, 2005

On a lighter note, I want to discuss a non-political element in my journey to being an empath. People always ask the question, “what radicalized you?” when discussing matters of empathy. I find it funny when this question is asked, because I guess I was just taught to be nice to people and respect those around me; these are two skills I grew up under the assumption were basic human necessities. On a deeper and more psychological level, I think I was truly radicalized by my love of drama on television. Whether I was a young child amazed by the lives of the characters on Disney Channel and Nickelodeon, being a teenager and crying to plotlines in *Gossip Girl*, *The Fosters*, and *The Vampire Diaries*, to now being an adult obsessed with binge-watching anything on the numerous streaming platforms I have access to, I’ve always found

myself engulfed in the lives and stories of these characters in the 128 TV shows I've seen (yes, I've kept count). I feel a crazy amount of empathy for every character in the shows I find myself obsessed with.

I aim for the characters painted in my work to have a similar effect on the viewers as to how I feel about characters in TV shows; I want the audience to put themselves in the shoes of the people they see yet will never truly know, just like one does with the consumption of media. An important aspect of painting these characters for me was the process of imagining their lives, their experiences, their names, their family trees, and what makes them who they are. Even though these characters are completely fictional, and their stories are completely up to interpretation, I found myself having empathy for them while painting the details of their appearances.

There have been many psychological studies on how the consumption of media can enhance one's empathy, this fact is evident in those who also consume way too much television, as well as those who read loads of fiction books and those who consider themselves film junkies. In a research article published in 2021 by Sonja Rohm, it's eloquently stated that "Exposure to fictional serial audiovisual narratives predicts empathy via vicarious interactions. Moreover, eudaimonic experiences positively predict vicarious interactions and empathy". To put this in an easier way to digest by an everyday human being, Rohm uses her research to theorize that watching fictional TV can increase empathy by allowing viewers to experience emotions through characters. When people engage deeply in meaningful stories, they feel as though they are part of the character's experience, which helps them understand and share emotions. Rohm's study highlights that well-crafted narratives can play a key role in developing empathy.



People You'll Never Meet, details

I have challenged myself by painting multiple figures on large-scale surfaces, all with the same level of detail and recognition. From developing the background of the work to painting the details of each individual portrait, I've created a narrative that the audience can engulf themselves in, including multiple plotlines and 23 characters to wonder about. My painting series is made up of three 4 ft by 4 ft wooden panels, making a 12 ft by 4 ft installation. These panels were made myself with the help of a peer through a process of transforming raw materials into a perfect base for my oil paintings.

The thought around my paintings is that there is a relationship between me as the artist, the characters depicted, and the viewer. My goal is for the viewer to walk across these 12 feet of wall space and to encounter these 23 figures and to recognize their shared humanity. I want the viewer to reflect on how every human being is going through a different path of life, and they all deserve respect and understanding. I aim to portray a message of empathy and compassion for people in different situations, and I invite the audience to engage with the concept of *sonder*. What brought the homeless man to where he is today? Does the single mother have support from her family? Does the woman eating dinner with her partner feel safe in her relationship? I

welcome the audience to step into the lives of the figures, to imagine their experiences and to truly see them – not as distant side-characters, but as fellow human beings.



People You'll Never Meet, installation

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